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Kitsch Happens. On the Kitsch Experience of Nature (Hommage à Tomáš Kulka)

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Abstract: In Kitsch and Art Tomáš Kulka notes that natural landscapes cannot be called kitsch. Kitsch needs to be produced by a human being, he says. I agree with that. Experience-wise it is more complicated, though. Sometimes kitsch affects our experience of landscapes. It is not just that our overwhelming culture of images affects how we see nature, but that also sugared, sentimental and stereotypical kitsch images of nature, that we see in postcards and social media, affect our experience of e.g. sunsets and picturesque landscapes. We might desire to fight back, but at least we need to understand and to some extent accept our situation. Kitsch is in our experience even when there is no kitsch around, and our experiences of nature prove that.
Keywords: Kitch, Tomas Kulka, kitschification, culture

Early 2000s, I spent a long weekend in the Norwegian mountains, where I participated in a Nordic post-graduate conference on aesthetics. After a day crowned by a keynote delivered by Martin Jay on the dangers of separating aesthetic experience from art, I walked out during the final dinner with my colleagues – just in time to see the sunset. The red sun coloured the mountains in pink and gold. It was beautiful. But I felt uneasy, aesthetically speaking.

For Kant colours are secondary (qualities) to (primary ones like) motion/rest, solidness, texture and spatial position/constellation. Secondary qualities are less formal than primary ones; less communicable. Kant thinks that they are less relevant for judgements of taste (Wentzel, 2005, p. 63). In a fictional passage in *Estetiikka* [Aesthetics], Aarne Kinnunen takes Kant to his hometown in Savonia (Central Eastern Finland), and they fly over the lakes, hills and forests. Kant is impressed. When they fly back, snow has covered the landscape. It is now completely white. Kant is shocked by the beauty. He sheds a tear (Kinnunen, 2000, p. 63). Kinnunen aims to accentuate how much landscapes change with colour.

Kant, had he been able to join us in Norway, would probably have thought of the sublime while looking at the mountains. The sublime was not what came to my mind, though. The 'original' landscape was already a bit 'too much'; as one participant of the conference said, 'too beautiful'. I am not convinced about the notion of 'too beautiful'. Dewey uses this concept about kitsch in *Art as Experience* (see Dewey, 1980, p. 78) – but I have always assumed that he refers to clumsy pretentiousness, not that something really would be too beautiful. I also assume that as people use the expression while they point to a person or a landscape, it usually means that there is something which disturbs beauty. Skiing in mid-February in my hometown Helsinki, when the sun suddenly returns and is too bright (mirrored by all the ice and snow), it is one of those moments when visual hysteria makes the appreciation of landscapes impossible. When people, on the other hand, are seen to be 'too beautiful', I have noticed that they meet the standards of a 'beautiful man/woman', but somehow lack warmth or charm. Sometimes they give the impression of being beautiful in a stiff way (a way that is not dynamic). The colouring of the landscape we were looking at during the conference, on the other hand, felt unreal in a plastic way, like something just on the surface.

The Norwegian landscape in itself did not lack anything. During the conference breaks, except for the one recalled in the beginning of my article, it was beautiful (also sublime if one desired to accentuate that). It was just that it echoed the stereotypical travel agency advertisements and postcard aesthetics slightly too much to really 'breathe'.

Umberto Eco writes in his 1964 essay *La struttura del cattivo gusto* (Eco, 1997; [The Structure of Bad Taste]), that when someone talks about kitsch in literature, s/he often refers to dead metaphors or overtly consumed expressions (take for example 'kisses that taste like eternity' or a description of a beautiful woman riding a white horse on a beach), and still today, at least when we talk about *romantic* cultural products, I think this holds. If a murder is stereotypical in a detective story, we would not usually call it kitsch, as it would just be bad entertainment, popular culture or mass culture. Stereotypical expression is of course one thing that a critical person can take up and call kitschy, but the concept is mostly attached to sentimentality, attributes seen to be typical for feminine consumer culture (prettiness, cuteness, pink colour) and sensibilities like cheesiness or 'sugared' (see e.g. Emmer, 1998; Solomon, 2004; and Ryynänen, 2018 for an overview). Coming back to the mountains, the scenery was generic, and one could say that it felt like something overtly consumed, or a dead symbol, a pathetic trace of German idealism, travel agency visuals, or urban bourgeois visions of romantic nature.

Anyway, 'Kitsch happens,' I said. My peers were not convinced. One of them said nature cannot be kitsch. I think he was right, but I think that his stance was about another issue, i.e. the fact that to be experienced as kitsch, an *object* needs to be manmade. It is just that drifting into a kitsch reaction/experience does not entail engagement with a kitsch object. As art in the 18th century once became a way of framing nature (the picturesque), to some extent this has started to happen quite naturally in our age with kitsch. "This landscape is like a painting" is somewhat analogous to "this landscape is like kitsch", although the kitsch experience might, at least for most, be more negative.[1]

The view of my peer is presented and is also theoretically backed-up in Tomáš Kulka's book on kitsch, *Kitsch and Art* (Kulka, 2010), where Kulka writes that "(n)*ature itself cannot be kitsch, only its representations can*" (Kulka, 2010, p. 90). He does not claim that we couldn't experience nature as something kitschy, as he does not really focus on experience, but he talks about landscapes (among other themes) that are suitable for kitsch portrayal, e.g. ones that include full moon, beaches with palms or a deer in a forest clearing. I am quite convinced that he would have thought that my view in Norway would have been suitable for kitsch portrayal (Kulka, 2010, p. 26).

Kulka's work is a constitutive classic for our scholarly discourse on kitsch, but while most texts on kitsch today mention it, it is sometimes hard to build on it anymore, as it belongs to a historical period where kitsch used to be considered as something negative, pointing to bad quality[2]. Kitsch often just meant pretentious pseudo art, at the same time as scholars classified all consumer culture as kitsch. Lately 'kitsch' has increasingly referred to knick-knacks. (see e.g. Olalquiaga, 2003; for an overview see Ryynänen, 2008, 2018). Today it would also be hard to react to *Dallas* and *Dynasty* (Kulka, 2010, p. 16), or nearly any TV series as kitsch, as the concept has narrowed down and embodied itself into a spectrum of features like pink/gold, certain materials (porcelain), femininity-driven mass culture (Hello Kitty) and reactions towards fake elevation (for example 'luxury'). (We are lacking a taxonomy of kitsch.) Sometimes, today too, of

[1] I am thankful to Lisa Giombini for this witty comment on my paper.

[2] It is worth noting, though, that Kulka respects the work of some marketplace painters if they have skills and ambition. See Kulka 2010, 7–8, p. 39.

course, kitsch is mentioned when something sugared, sentimental or just otherwise hard to digest critically is too hastily or in a false manner claimed to be art, but this is no longer the main focus of the concept.

For years Kulka's (and my peer's) comment on nature haunted me. I still think it is the wrong question/perspective. This is of course easier to see from the point of view of today's art world and aesthetic research, where processes have increasingly become more important than objects.

The history of the concept has not been straightforward. As Kulka was the first to really nail the connection of kitsch and tourism, his work has also, with respect to knick-knacks (which are analysed quite extensively in his work), been progressive and important for later research. It does not just land in the 'canon' of kitsch, but opens, in the footsteps of Eco (1997), who wrote for example about bad taste in choosing a tie for a suit, the door to everyday objects and culture. We still lack the final step here. Clement Greenberg, in his 1939 *Avant-Garde and Kitsch* (1986) has already mentioned fake tourist knick-knacks, focusing on the way they were presented as 'authentic', but at least today, truly, for (most) tourists the knick-knacks they buy have nothing to do with authenticity, as they are just plain knick-knacks and the buyer understands this [Dorfles (1969) and Calinescu (1987) generally follow Greenberg's path].

If Greenberg's attitude in 1939 that 'everything that lands between high modernism and folk art is kitsch' was all-encompassing, looking at the second wave of kitsch research, which starts with Umberto Eco's 1964 *La struttura del cattivo gusto* (Eco, 1997), and which ends with Kulka's work (Kulka, 2010; see also Kulka, 1988), the idea historical work of Calinescu, 1987, and the historical overview of Ryynänen, 2018), kitsch is no longer under attack that much, but is just under curious analysis and scrutiny.

The third wave already shows how the appreciation of kitsch, the way the concept is growing into being increasingly positive, is visible in the works of Celeste Olalquiaga (2002) and Odd Nerdrum and his pro kitsch art (and art history) community (Nerdrum et al., 2001; see also Anderson (2010) who discusses cheesiness, particularly kitsch, in a happy manner). C. E. Emmer first analysed its accent on female culture in 1998 (Emmer, 1998), and Robert Solomon discussed the cynical attitude intellectuals show towards sentimentality in 2004 (Solomon, 2004). We have also grown to understand how kitsch is applied as a concept and sensitivity differently in different countries, and how materials (e.g. porcelain) and colour (pink, gold) create reactions where the concepts pops into the mind (Ryynänen, 2018; Ryynänen – Somhegyi, 2018).

The last wave, I think, makes the question of nature as a source of kitsch experiences possible. If the earlier waves of thinking were about condemning kitsch or looking at it from the outside, the new way of thinking and experiencing (my students say they love kitsch) is looking at it as a cultural tradition, which we all take part in, whether we want to or not, at least in some way. Authors on this side of the millennium are no longer much interested in good/bad art (which for them is just good/bad art) or the non-legitimization of certain forms of e.g. (lowbrow) painting, when they discuss kitsch.

In a letter to Kulka, Milan Kundera recalls that when there were not many cars about, they were sometimes experienced as horrible, but in later times, with too many cars, people have no longer reacted, as cars have become a norm in culture – and then suggests that this might have happened to our relationship to kitsch (foreword to the Finnish edition; Kulka, 1997, p. 3). In some sense this might be true, but one must also bear in mind that the hierarchical way of looking belittlingly at people who had not acquired a taste based on the central European system of art (Kristeller, 1951), has become problematic both politically and culturally, as we understand the complicated class-, gender- and ethnicity-driven nature of the old art system (ibid.; see also e.g. Bourdieu, 1986).

It is noteworthy how many kitsch images we see all the time, i.e. images we react to, or could react to, as kitsch. They might be simply a part of the media, popular and mass cultured flood of visual culture we live in, but they make an affective difference following their cheesy, overtly sugary and sentimental nature. Adorno claims in his 1944 *Culture Industry* that the all-encompassing capitalist machinery works through an endless cultural hammering (on the subject), a flood of aesthetically corrupted culture, which in the end, through repetition, becomes an *a priori* for how people view beauty and art (Adorno, 1969). Guy Debord follows Adorno in his 1957 *Society of the Spectacle* (2000), where he sees images as the only late modern glue of the society. And, when one looks at Baudrillard's claim that it has become virtually impossible to separate images from the 'real' (seen outside the world of representations, i.e.) (Baudrillard, 1994), one has theoretically arrived at understanding that the story of the Norwegian mountains (coloured by the sunset) could be read as just one new example of this thread of critical theory. The topic also comes close to Samuel Weber's reflections on 9/11, where he shows how people talked and viewed the catastrophe by relating to its visual resemblance to catastrophe movies (Weber, 2013).

The way kitsch has somehow become a part of our cultural *a priori* to the extent that we can react to a natural landscape as we would encounter kitsch, is amazing. Repetition makes certain patterns generic. I recall my own arrival in the US for a term at Temple University Philadelphia in 2002, when I felt that I was in a movie as I saw a police car driving by the first time I went to the grocery store.

In Norway, the red and golden sun made the landscape look like a postcard and a travel advertisement. It was not an intellectual interpretation/reflection which led to this, but an immediate reaction. The interesting thing is that following this reaction, I/we entered a dialectical interpretation/experience, where I/we had to remind myself about the fact that this was a real natural landscape, not kitsch. This did not, in the end, change much in the experience. The experience owed itself to the kitschification (visual appropriation) of landscapes. (One must remember that our way of focusing on landscapes is, by its very nature, an artificial modern cultural product: Is this why it easily opens the backdoor for the impact of kitsch?)

It is maybe the same process which raises anger in the 'fans' of classical music, who become irritated when a piece by W. A. Mozart is used in a car, chocolate or SPA advertisement. What at first glance looks like elitism is perhaps a reaction to the same kind of kitschification which we already noted had happened with generic landscapes. If repeated too many times in the 'wrong' context, the composition gains a kitschy trace which also pops up in the experience at stake in the concert hall. Kitsch takes over the original experientially, at least to some extent.

It applies to the urban environment too. When I walk in Venice, I know that it is original, and I respect the work of the (European/Arabic) architects who created the glorious maze, but still, maybe partly following the tourist atmosphere, and even more following the endless repetition of images where the city is used as a 'romantic' icon, a 'real moment' at San Marco feels just awkward, plastic, and sugared.

In nature I have experienced this in Finnish Lapland, the High Tatras and Switzerland (the Alps). Kitsch just happens, suddenly, without an invitation, and it is hard not to note the reaction to it. While Kulka concentrates only on the objects that someone has created according to his/her low taste (or lack of understanding of craft/colours), Jay was, in his Norwegian keynote (already published earlier, see Jay, 1999), in the footsteps of Walter Benjamin (Benjamin, 2008), worried about the way the positive attention, and through that the support to aesthetic experience outside art, could result in dangerous side-effects (like accepting certain economic or political phenomena following their enchanting aesthetic nature).

It is just that the experience is still there, whether scholars desire/accept it or not, and I think Jay erroneously thought that scholars would not be critical when they turned to these issues of politico-aesthetical pleasure [they are, as one can see e.g. in the later work of Carsten Friberg (2018) and Crispin Sartwell (2010)].

The issue of kitsch is of course (I am sure Jay would agree with me) less a question of danger than the 'looks' of fascism. But how did kitsch become a part of us and what does that entail? The consumer society sits deep in our subjectivity and our way of perceiving the world. What remains, I think, is to take a Benjaminian stance, to try to experience and to write about this experience faithfully (Benjamin, 2006), whether we liked the experiences or not, and so to make the critical remarks and analyses needed for a better understanding of the world.

Kitsch is something which does not (mostly) support our understanding of the deepest issues of life (of course sometimes a cheesy yoga poster can help us to navigate in our meditation), nor does it pave the way for a more democratic or ethical society, at least not in any simple manner. The fact that one might not appreciate a landscape as much as would be possible, following the reaction and experience of kitsch, is something worthy of our attention – as much as the fact that kitsch might also increase some people's interest in taking care of some environments more than others. In the same fashion, the way some of us want to protect (cute) cats and (cute) dogs and give them more rights than animals that are not as cute (or to the same extent visually consumed), is an issue close to the one at stake here.

The fact kitschy landscapes raise in some us negative reactions, in some of us positive – 'Look, Jerry, this is just like a postcard!' – is something we need to understand too. (Liberal) arts education might not be the best one to have in a 'kitsch happens' situation in nature. Besides basic perception, it is hard to reduce our taste, our personal historical experience and the traces of the images we have seen or learned to recognize. To understand what we are, we might need to redefine the old concept of the *Kitschmensch*, which used to refer to someone who had bad taste, but which could now mean someone who cannot look at a cheesy sunset without a reaction. We are of course all 'programmed' visually, not just by art, documentary footage and basic mass and media culture, but also by kitsch. We even react more to sentimentally kitschy war images and it is only then social media *really* cries for peace (see Ryynänen, 2019 on the Syrian war and its painful key kitsch images). This makes the findings we have gone through here also potentially a new opening for future discussions about ethics and visual culture, as our ideas on landscapes have already shown on their behalf. All this is, of course, just one echo of a trace which Kulka has left us. We owe him a lot.

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